



Back to Saint Andrews

James Spence returns to Scotland's most famous golf course, the scene of many a triumphant day, to see if the old course has stood the test of time.

I have a lifelong association with Fife, and the university town of St Andrews. It was the location of several family holidays. I started playing the game at age 8 at Elie during a summer in which my family had rented a house on the beach - the same place and age that James Braid started playing golf 95 years earlier. In another summer, we were staying at Kincauld during the hot summer of 1975, my father travelled back with Jack Newton on a hovercraft after he had just lost a playoff to Tom Watson across the bay at Carnoustie. In 1984, I was in the grandstands with my father when Balles-teros holed a curly downhiller to win the Open. In 2001, I made a trip from Hong Kong to play the fabulous Kingsbarns Course near Crail, staying B&B at the house of Baron Erskine on whose land the course was built, and who 15 years previous had been my student landlord at Cambo House. In 1982, armed with the requisite number of Scottish Highers, I chose the University with the highest density of golf courses and spent four years at St. Andrews as a student, graduating with a moderate degree in Philosophy and an immoderate hook shot. ☺



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© As a student you became quickly aware of the high and static number of public houses and the small and shrinking number of bookshops. Pubs went in and out of fashion with students and this had nothing whatsoever to do with the beer, service or ambience. In fact it was entirely whimsical. In my first year the Niblick (then just 20 steps from the 18th Green of the Old) was the only place to drink. In my second it was the Castle Tavern at the far end of North Street. The Central on Market Street was popular with students of Arabic Culture. A friend became the drinking buddy of Tip Anderson (Arnold Palmer’s caddie at many Opens) at The Criterion on South Street. The Niblick by the 17th Fairway was an occasional place to go, often after 16 and a half holes. Popular with visiting Americans and their local caddies, I seem to remember the beer prices were a little elevated - elevated at least to those of us that felt that 75p a pint was a natural and immutable ceiling.

I made precisely two trips to the Old Course Hotel in my four student years. The hotel was, and remains, the town’s brush with international luxury and therefore a place injurious to the student allowance. One the first occasion a few of us were sitting around somebody’s room at St Salvator’s Hall when one bright spark suggested we go for cocktails at the Road Hole bar at the Hotel. The merit in this idea lay in its contrariness. Each of us ordered a cocktail and I remember the pianist tinkling away, just as he does today.

The second visit was sponsored by the Champagne house of Laurent-Perrier, motto: Ne Buvez Jamais d’Eau (Never Drink Water). Whether it was extreme farsightedness or a strategic error, Laurent-Perrier held a tasting evening of their full range of champagnes to a group of undergraduates. The University Wine Society had been chugging along on Lambrusco and Amontillado for years became a

much more popular society as a result. The Old Course Hotel provided a ballroom for the event and I can distinctly remember the moment when the head representative from the champagne house suggested that, having tasted each variant in turn, we might like to approach one of the tables for a further reconnoitre. We needed no further invitation and paced over to the Vintage table and surrounded the man from L-P. One of our number asked the representative to help demonstrate the elegant pouring technique whereby the thumb of the right hand is positioned in the indent under the bottle. “Mais oui !”. Very soon each of us had a bottle in hand and were filling each others’ glasses at will.

Diverse business

Since 2004, The Old Course Hotel and Spa has been owned by Kohler Co., the family company whose business is plumbing but who is best known in the golfing world for building the Whistling Straits course on the banks of Lake Michigan. It is 26 years since my last visit, so comparisons are hazy but clearly the Kohler’s have made a substantial investment both in the hotel and in developing the inland course The Duke’s, which is just outside the town.

The course is the only non-seaside course at St Andrews and was designed by Peter Thomson and latterly modified by Tim Liddy. The Duke’s offers a great escape from the hullabaloo surrounding the Old and, being on a rural site above town, is serene with some great views. The course can be long but offers a range of tees which measures the course from 7,512 yards down to 5,216 yards. Although the members generally walk it, some transitions between greens and tees are lengthy so many visitors will be tempted by the option of a golf-cart.

In the evening prior to playing the Dukes I find myself back on the top floor in the Road Hole bar where we are offered a glass of house champagne, which indeed turns out to be Laurent-Perrier, closing that particular circle. This formed the start of a meal at the Road Hole Restaurant which was simultaneously formal, modern and delicious. Scallops two ways, lamb rump and sweetbreads, almond and apricot cake for my part.

Earlier in the day we were also able to have a quick lunch in the downstairs Sands Grill, replacing langoustines with the chicken in a Caesar salad which was not a premeditated move but something that the kitchen were happy to accommodate. Gary, the waiter, asked if we were expecting “my lady”, which we were but she was late returning from shopping in town (shopping opportunities are much improved from the 1980s I note). The wait extended somewhat and in the intervening time Gary and I elevated my wife to Her Ladyship. Graced finally with her presence, salads were delivered, a quick and excellent coffee then off to the course.

My breakfast the next morning was of the heroic Scottish variety but there are also lighter options – a wide variety of fruits, breads and cereals, jams and honeycomb and porridge in a multitude of styles, with/without milk, honey, compote.

What you might expect of a grand hotel with a strong American connection is excellent service, plumbing and beds, this and the location, are its real claims. There are very few quick or easy rounds of golf in St Andrews in the summer so recovery is the key. The Old Course Hotel provides the key elements of recovery. The Spa is excellent and specialises in water based therapies. The rooms have deep bath tubs, piped with jets and chromotherapeutic lighting based on the ayurvedic belief that certain elemental lights can en-

gender or develop moods and characters. I selected the soothing aspect of blue. The Road Hole Bar stocks over 200 whiskies, the house champagne is Laurent-Perrier as mentioned and the wine list is extensive and particularly strong on French and American reds. The Sands Grill has all the best of Scotland grilled and the Road Hole Restaurant is more formal, with the views you would expect. The views from the sea facing rooms are peerless and there is little better spectator sport than watching successive groups take on the second shot at the 17th. The West Deck, which is a new outdoors perch above the old sheds is a great addition. Finally, sleep. I don’t know what the huge beds are stuffed with, but it works. Tired bodies can recline for a welcome night’s sleep and rise to take on another golfing test.

James stayed courtesy of The Old Course Hotel and Spa, rooms from £380 per night, Fairways Suites from £680 per night.

Reservations: + 44 (0) 1334 474371 or www.oldcoursehotel.co.uk. Reservations at the Duke’s Course can be made via the hotel’s website or email at reservations@oldcoursehotel.co.uk.

Next month in Back to St Andrews – Part II, James writes about the St Andrews Links Trust, the charitable body that looks after seven golf courses at the Home of Golf including the Old Course and the recently opened Castle Course.

James Spence is a Managing Partner of Cerno Capital, an independent wealth management firm, and author of: The Finest Golf Courses of Asia & Australasia www.golfcoursesofasia.com.